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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 006366

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SUBJECT: THAI RAK THAI LEADER DISCUSSES POLITICAL
ENVIRONMENT

REF: BANGKOK 6289 (TRT FACES UNCERTAIN FUTURE)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Acting Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party Leader Chaturon Chaiseng said TRT will refuse to participate in activities of or bodies formed by the interim government, but TRT will not openly criticize the government. In an October 17 lunch with the Ambassador, Chaturon said he had not been intimidated by the coup leaders, but other party officials were bullied into resigning from TRT. Chaturon refused to contact Thaksin as he formulates TRT policies. He predicted TRT would likely be dissolved, although he viewed members of the Constitutional Tribunal, which will decide the party's fate, as relatively objective. Chaturon decried the effect of the coup on Thai institutions and urged that the USG continue to encourage the restoration of civil liberties. He believed the drafters of Thailand's next constitution would find it difficult to use the 1997 Constitution as a basis for their work. He related that Thaksin had planned to withdraw from politics prior to the coup, but he had not made this plan public because advisors warned against emboldening critics. Chaturon admitted that some TRT figures might have planned to confront anti-Thaksin demonstrators at a scheduled demonstration on September 20, but he dismissed this scenario as warranting a coup. End Summary.

RUNNING THAI RAK THAI WITHOUT THAKSIN

2. (C) In an October 17 lunch hosted by the Ambassador, acting Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party Leader Chaturon Chaiseng explained that he had set three conditions for his assuming what he termed caretaker leadership of TRT: (1) he would be independent from Thaksin; (2) the party would adhere to democratic principles and not work for the coup leaders; (3) the party would pursue reconciliation, rather than taking a hard-line stance against the coup.

3. (C) In accordance with the above principles, TRT would not denounce the interim government or focus on its illegitimacy. However, TRT would not provide representatives for any committee set up by the government, including the National People's Assembly (a subset of which will draft the next constitution) or the National Legislative Assembly (NLA - Thailand's new interim parliament). Chaturon said former TRT figure Pinij Charusombat, selected by the Council for

National Security (CNS) as one of four political party representatives in the NLA, did not represent TRT and had not been selected by TRT to join the NLA.

14. (C) Chaturon said he had not spoken with Thaksin since the coup, and he intended not to have contact with the deposed Prime Minister. Although friends had told Chaturon he should have Thaksin's support in order to lead TRT, Chaturon said he felt the party officials remaining in Thailand should set TRT's course. He had told others in TRT that he would act as a true leader, not as Thaksin's puppet, as Chidchai Vanasatidya had been, when he became acting Prime Minister during Thaksin's spring 2006 break from politics.

SOME INTIMIDATED INTO LEAVING TRT

15. (C) When asked about the desertion of TRT by many of its leading figures, Chaturon asserted that military figures (NFI) had pressed TRT officials to cooperate with them, threatening them with further investigations (NFI) if they failed to do so. Chaturon said some were intimidated by the threat of a five-year loss of political rights (for TRT executive board members, if the Constitutional Tribunal orders the party dissolved -- see below).

16. (C) Chaturon said he himself had not been approached by military figures; he characterized his relationship with CNS Chairman Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratglin and others in Sonthi's clique as "very good." He also said he was not close to interim PM Surayud Chulanont, but he had heard Surayud had said good things about him. Thaksin's opponents knew that many in TRT, including Chaturon himself, had privately

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expressed their disagreement with Thaksin.

17. (C) Chaturon observed that former Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak appeared likely to team up with Somsak Thepsutin, former leader of the largest faction within TRT, to form a new party. Their roles or political vehicle remained uncertain, however. Former Deputy PM Surakiart Sathirathai also was likely to join Somsak. Chaturon noted he had consulted with former TRT Deputy Leader Sudarat Keyuraphan, and, although she remained with TRT, she did not want to step up to become acting Party Leader, because she did not want difficulties with the CNS.

PARTY'S FATE UP IN THE AIR

18. (C) The Ambassador asked Chaturon's views of the upcoming Constitutional Tribunal case concerning alleged fraud by TRT in the period leading up to April 2006 elections. Chaturon first said he considered it "likely" that the Constitutional Tribunal would dissolve TRT. When pressed, though, he later estimated the odds at "50-50." Chaturon claimed that he did not believe legal grounds existed for ordering TRT's dissolution. Very few people in TRT had known of or been complicit in the inappropriate activities in question -- just Thaksin, Transportation Minister Pongsak Ruktapongpisal, and Defense Minister Thammarak Isarangura Na Ayutthaya, Chaturon said.

19. (C) Chaturon noted that several figures on the Constitutional Tribunal appeared independent and unlikely to bow to political pressure to rule against TRT, in the event such pressure is applied. He was appreciative that the Tribunal would likely consider TRT's case in the near future, since this would remove uncertainty sooner rather than later. He also viewed as hollow the threat of a five-year ban from politics, based on a September 30 announcement by the coup leaders, because such a penalty could not be applied retroactively, according to long established principles of Thai law.

¶10. (C) If TRT were spared from dissolution, the party had a sufficient budget for 3-4 months of operations, Chaturon said, since TRT's activities were minimal, given the current environment. Chaturon could not accurately gauge sentiment toward the coup in the TRT bases of northeastern and northern Thailand. But he said many people from those regions had advised TRT politicians not to desert TRT, because voters in those regions liked the party's policies. This strong association of a party with particular policies represented a significant step forward in the development of Thai democracy, Chaturon noted.

RESTORING DEMOCRACY

¶11. (C) Chaturon repeatedly denounced the September 19 coup as illegitimate, and he bemoaned the failure of Thailand's intellectual class to condemn the coup. Despite the lack of bloodshed, the coup represented a violent act. Even though Thaksin had become autocratic, there were alternatives to a coup; eventually, people would have become dissatisfied, and, faced with this pressure, Thaksin would have had to step down, and there would have been a democratic movement for constitutional reform. Thai people were too impatient, Chaturon said. He scoffed at the idea that the coup leaders' interim constitution merited the term "constitution" -- it was simply a decree from the Generals.

¶12. (C) The Generals likely had not aimed to hold on to power for a long period, Chaturon said. They believed a coup was necessary, but they might prove reluctant to abandon their enhanced positions without alternate means to retain power. Coup leaders might find it difficult to feel secure they would not face recrimination for their acts. Some politicians were already talking with the Generals about how they could benefit from a new relationship, Chaturon said. Chaturon viewed skeptically the prospect of democratic elections within a year -- people who launch coups do not believe in democracy or elections, he quipped.

¶13. (C) Chaturon doubted that the drafters of the next constitution would be able to base their work on the 1997

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charter. The drafters would soon find that too many provisions of the 1997 Constitution were interrelated, and it would prove too difficult to pick and choose elements, trying to preserve some while discarding others. It would be simpler to start from scratch, he said.

¶14. (C) The Ambassador explained USG efforts to press the government to lift of martial law. Chaturon predicted that cabinet officials responsible for economic affairs would soon realize that it was in the government's own interest to lift martial law, to improve the climate for investment and tourism. However, he encouraged the Ambassador to work to promote democratization and the full restoration of civil liberties. However, TRT would not call publicly for the repeal of martial law, Chaturon said, implying such a call would be too confrontational.

REFLECTING ON THE RUNUP TO THE COUP

¶15. (C) Asked to explain the dynamics leading to the coup, Chaturon observed that Thaksin had been inexperienced in what he termed "real Thai politics." Thaksin was naive to believe he could exert control of the Armed Forces through his network of Class 10 military officers. (The upcoming military reshuffle likely influenced the timing of the coup, Chaturon said, although Thaksin's having been abroad was more important.) Thaksin advisor Pansak Vinyaratn had been misguided in prioritizing trips overseas that would allow Thaksin to strengthen his ties to foreign leaders.

¶16. (C) Thaksin had told Chaturon privately around August

2006 that he would "quit" politics, Chaturon said, but Thaksin was reluctant to specify a timeframe for announcing this decision. Some advisors had counseled Thaksin that any sign of weakness or retreat would just embolden Thaksin's opponents.

¶17. (C) Thaksin had appeared confident before leaving on his fateful overseas trip, Chaturon said. Thaksin had not discussed coup contingency plans with him before leaving, although Chaturon acknowledged that Thaksin might have had such discussions with others TRT figures, like Prommin Lertsuridej. When the Ambassador asked whether there was truth to rumors that the coup was required to prevent political violence against demonstrators by pro-TRT figures, Chaturon said it was possible that some in TRT -- specifically, Newin Chidchob and Yongyuth Tiyaipairat -- might have contemplated confronting anti-Thaksin demonstrators planning a rally for September 20. But Chaturon did not appear to believe any serious confrontation would have taken place.

¶18. (C) When the Ambassador asked Chaturon, who served as Education Minister at the time of the coup, why he did not resign from the cabinet in order to increase pressure on Thaksin to adjust his course, Chaturon noted that this gesture might have sent a public signal -- but "then, what would I do?" He bemoaned the low level of influence of former cabinet ministers; he did not relish the prospect of becoming some type of independent commentator.

COMMENT

¶19. (C) New TRT leader Chaturon could not be more different from Thaksin, especially temperamentally. Frankly, it is a bit of a mystery to us why he agreed to take on his new job. Chaturon is well known in Thai society as having been a student activist in the 1970's. Many former activists (who remain important shapers of public opinion) were very dismissive of Chaturon for "selling out" his ideals and taking a position in Thaksin's cabinet. At the same time, Chaturon was never trusted by Thaksin or his inner circle (wife Pojaman, Prommin Lertsuridej, Newin Chidchob, Yongyuth Tiyaipairat, Sudarat Keyuraphan, et. al.). As such, he is a logical, if ironic, choice to succeed Thaksin as TRT leader at this time of transition. We agree with Chaturon's observation that TRT had made meaningful progress in developing a loyalty with some constituencies that went beyond simple money politics or personalities. At this point, though, the party's fortunes depend on factors far outside of Chaturon's control.

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